

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, MAY 8, 2022

Pacific Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

FOURTH SUNDAY of EASTER

GATHERING

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP *(based on Psalm 30)*

One: Sing praises to God, O you saints of God.
All: Give thanks to God's holy name.
One: Give thanks to God who turns mourning into dancing.
All: Praise God who hears our cries and answers our prayers.
One: Thank God for healing and ever-present help.
All: Praise God for the joyous gift of a new day.
One: For Christ is risen!
All: He is risen indeed!

***OPENING HYMN** "Christ Is Risen! Shout Hosanna!" GtG 248

- 1. Christ is risen! Shout Hosanna!**
Celebrate this day of days!
Christ is risen! Hush in wonder:
all creation is amazed.
In the desert all-surrounding,
see, a spreading tree has grown.
Healing leaves of grace abounding
bring a taste of love unknown.
- 2. Christ is risen! Raise your spirits**
from the caverns of despair.
Walk with gladness in the morning.
See what love can do and dare.
Drink the wine of resurrection,
not a servant, but a friend.
Jesus is our strong companion.
Joy and peace shall never end.

3. **Christ is risen! Earth and heaven
nevermore shall be the same.
Break the bread of new creation
where the world is still in pain.
Tell its grim, demonic chorus:
"Christ is risen! Get you gone!"
God the First and Last is with us.
Sing Hosanna, everyone!**

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***UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION**

**Lord God, in the light of your glory
we see the evil we have done,
the suffering we have caused,
the good we have refused,
and the truth we have denied.
Heal us of our sin,
wash us in your mercy,
and feed us with your grace,
so that we may follow your way
and share the good news of the gospel. Amen.**

***SILENT CONFESSION**

***ASSURANCE OF PARDON**

One: Christ transforms. Christ redeems and renews.
All: **Through Christ's death and resurrection, we are a new creation,
ready to sing God's glory and testify to God's grace.**
One: In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven.
All: **Thanks be to God!**

***THE PEACE**

One: The peace of Christ be with you.
All: **And also with you.**

*(From your seat, a brief sign of peace may be shared: a wave of the hand, a nod
of the head, etc.)*

THE WORD

SCRIPTURE READING Acts 9:1-20

ACTS 9:1-20 (various)

¹ Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the disciples of the Lord. He went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³ As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" ⁵ He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶ But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you must do." ⁷ The men who were traveling with him stood there speechless; they heard the voice but saw no one. ⁸ Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. ⁹ For three days he was not able to see, and neither ate nor drank.

¹⁰ In Damascus there was a certain disciple named Ananias. The Lord spoke to him in a vision, "Ananias!" He answered, "Here I am, Lord." ¹¹ The Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul. For he is praying, ¹² and in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come in and place his hands on him so that he might see again." ¹³ But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; ¹⁴ and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name." ¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, "Go, for this man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before Gentiles and kings and to the children of Israel. ¹⁶ For I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." ¹⁷ So Ananias went and entered the house. He placed his hands on him and said, "Brother Saul, "the Lord has sent me -- Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here -- has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁸ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he could see again. Then he got up and was baptized, ¹⁹ and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, ²⁰ and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON by Pastor Bill Vincent

The conversion of Saul. That's what we call it. That's how this passage is known to us: as the conversion of Saul.

Too bad it's a misnomer. And not only misnamed, but mis-focused.

For the focus is not Saul. Even though he is mentioned throughout the passage. Even though it is his story: a story about an event in his life...and a significant one at that.

But the focus is not Saul.

The focus is Jesus: *“the one you are persecuting,”* as the voice announces.

We often focus on the wrong thing in this story, thinking it’s all about Saul, and so focusing our attention on Saul and what we can learn from Saul.

But when we do that, we miss the real focus...and the real lesson.

For the focus, as I have said, is not Saul, but Jesus.

Jesus – the resurrected Lord – is the driving force behind the story and its action.

Jesus is the prime actor in this story. Saul is the one acted upon.

Jesus is the one who guides and directs the action toward its destination, for his purpose.

Jesus. The Lord. The focus of the story.

One wonders if we think of our own story – our own life – in that way.

Do we consider that, “Of course, I am the lead in my own story. Of course I am the main protagonist in the events of my life. The story of my life is the story about ME. I am the focus.”

Or am I?

Need I be reminded – especially as one who claims to be a follower of Christ – that I am not the focus of my life, but Christ is...or is supposed to be.

So, will I claim that for my life?

Will I live that in my life?

The focus is not Saul.

The focus is Jesus.

Turns out, though, we may have another mistaken notion about this story.

We hear this story about the conversion of Saul – even though it’s a story about a conversion affected by Jesus – and we think, “Wow, that’s awesome. But if I am honest with myself, I’ve never had an experience like that.” Now, I realize some of you may have – and I do not dismiss that. But I do dare to say that many, if not most, of us present here this morning have not had a blinding light – with a voice attached – knock us to the ground.

But then I sometimes wonder: can I claim, then, to have had a legitimate conversion experience? Let’s get down to it: Can I legitimately claim to be a genuine Christian if I have not had an experience like Saul’s?

You see, all too often, people will talk about this story and lift it up as a prototype of the real Christian conversion experience: the expected “Damascus road” experience.

But when we do that – and especially when we expect that of ourselves and even expect it of others – we have mis-heard the story and mis-represented its message.

So Joseph Harvard says,

It is important to remember that what happened to Saul was noteworthy precisely because it was *not* typical of the way most people became converts.

(Joseph S. Harvard, Pastor; “Pastoral Perspective,” *Feasting on the Word C-2*)

“Not everyone needs to be shaken by the shoulders,” Cathy Caldwell Hoop writes, **“but Saul does.”** (Cathy Caldwell Hoop, Pastor; “Connecting the Reading with the World,” *Connections C-2*)

Saul was so adamant and so stubborn, so determined and so laser-focused, that it appears this may have been the only way the Lord could get his attention: to knock him off his feet.

“Thus,” as James Newsome writes,

Thus the very nature of [Saul’s] conversion is a reflection of his state of mind and heart in the period leading up to his changed life, and it perhaps demonstrates as remarkably as any other biblical text that God employs means of reaching an individual that are commensurate with that individual’s needs. Acts 9:1-20 stands not so much as a formulaic representation of what God would do with each individual as it stands as a reminder that God would deal with each of us according to who we are.

(James D. Newsome, *Texts for Preaching-Year C*)

The way in which Saul’s conversion was experienced was shaped and formed and crafted to fit Saul’s experience and Saul’s personality and Saul himself.

So, we are not expected to have our own Damascus Road experience like Saul in order to authentically claim to be a follower of Christ.

That was Saul’s experience, wonder as it was.

The question now becomes: What’s your experience?

Saul’s experience is an affirmation that the Lord reaches out to us and speaks to us and works to get our attention in ways that resonate with our experience and our personality, with who we are.

So that William Muehl writes,

“The roads to Christian faith are as varied as the people who profess it.”

(*Why Preach? Why Listen?* 17; found in *Feasting on the Word C-2*, “Pastoral Perspective”)

So, how has the Lord spoken to you? How does the Lord get your attention?

“God has been working on my heart for a while.” I’ve heard that from people before. Perhaps you’ve experienced it, too. That’s a very different way than knocking someone to the ground.

Perhaps you’ve heard a gentle voice, like the first disciples, say, “Follow me,” or, “Come and see.”

Have you known, like the prophet Jeremiah, that pesky inner voice that cannot be denied and will not let you go until you heed it?

Or perhaps you have known, like Isaiah, the pageantry and majesty and awe of the temple – that wonder and that glory – to which Isaiah responds, “Woe is me!”

Sometimes, we may think that God has to stomp and rant and rave to get our attention. Through the thunder, through the wind roaring or the fire raging. Through the vastness and immenseness of creation.

So the psalmist writes,
*Deep calls to deep
at the thunder of your cataracts”*
(Psalm 42:7 NRSV)

Think of standing beside Niagara Falls: all that water, all that power. The thunder of the cataracts calling to us and speaking to something deep within.
Yes, sometimes God speaks that way.

But not always.

Remember Elijah. Having fled in fear, he finds himself on the holy mountain, God’s mountain. He experiences great wind that beats against the mountain; he experiences an earthquake, then fire. But God was not in any of that. But God was in “*a still small voice*” (RSV). Or, as another translation puts it, “*a sound of sheer silence*” (NRSV).

Sometimes we can deal with, and even hold at arms’ length, the “thunder of the cataracts,” the earthquake, wind, and fire. But it is the “*sound of sheer silence*” – that quiet, and in that quiet, that seeming vastness and unending expanse – that catches us and catches us off guard, and captures our attention if not captures us, reeling us in, reinforcing the “sheer”ness of the silence, redirecting the gaze and the glance and the guidance of our lives...and redirecting us.

In many and various ways God may speak to us and reach out to us to capture our attention.

But there is also truth in saying that in all those many and various ways that God speaks to us, there is something similar to them all.

The methods may be different, but the themes are the same.

Stephen Jones reminds us,

Not many of us are "breathing [out murderous threats]" against our opponents. However, we have all been on wrong paths that have been injurious to ourselves and others. We have all been headstrong, stubborn, blinded to our own ambition, selfish to meet our own need, caught in addictive behaviors, and oblivious of the true cost to others or to ourselves.

(Stephen D. Jones, Pastor; “Homiletical Perspective,” *Feasting on the Word C-2*)

We have all been on the wrong path. We have all been in need of our Lord grasping us and catching our attention, that the path of our lives might be redirected down the path of the Lord’s focus and the Lord’s work and purpose.

So we come back to the truth that the focus is not us, but the Lord.

But I also want us to note a truth that Walter Brueggemann shares. He acknowledges that **the point of our reading is not [Saul’s] experience.** But then he highlights that deep down, at the root of this story, the point is **the self-disclosure of Jesus.** (Walter Brueggemann, “Connecting the Reading with Scripture,” *Connections C-2*)

In this story – and remember, the focus is not on Saul, the focus is on Jesus – in this story, Jesus reveals himself to Saul: discloses himself to Saul. That is the essence of the story...and its lesson.

And I believe that is the essence of the experiences we have listed and claimed and recognized as our own, as well: they are, each one of them, a revealing, a disclosing of Christ's self to us.

So that in our experience, we learn that Jesus is the resurrected one.

In our experience, we have it revealed to us that Jesus is the Lord.

In our experience, the Lord is disclosed to us as shepherd, as guide, as teacher, as eternal and encouraging presence.

And if we sit with that and hear that and let the import of that disclosure sink in, we come to realize that we learn who we are in learning who he is.

In Jesus' disclosure of himself we discern our own disclosure – our own revealing – and we discover our own selves, our identity, who we really are.

So Ananias, who has his own 'conversion' experience in this story,

recognizes Jesus as Lord, thereby acknowledging himself as one summoned to obedience. (Walter Brueggemann, "Connecting the Reading with Scripture," *Connections C-2*)

As Jesus is Lord, we are those who are intended to follow and obey.

As Jesus is teacher, we are disciple, learner.

As Jesus is shepherd, we are sheep – and sometimes lost.

And as God is creator, we are the created ones – creatures. And that disclosure greatly impacts our relationship to God and our relationship to other 'created ones'. I.e., should we not be respectful of one another as fellow 'created ones' of the Lord?

Think back on our story. At the very beginning, that voice comes to Saul, "*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?*"

"*Who are you Lord?*" he asks.

And the response? Imagine that: "*I am Jesus.*"

Saul knew Jesus was dead. And here this voice says, "*I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.*"

In many ways, that reminds us of the ultimate, the foundational disclosure to us.

This is Jesus: the one who was crucified for our sakes, for our sins, that we might be forgiven.

This is Jesus: the one who was raised to new life to remind us that we are never alone and nothing can take us from his love.

In that disclosure to us, we know who we are. We are forgiven. We are embraced. We are loved.

And in that knowledge, in that understanding of who we are and who Christ is, we can listen further to know more specifically who we are in relation to the one who comes to us and speaks to us and desires our attention; and know our calling and our life, and embrace it, even as he embraces us.

***HYMN** "Jesus Calls Us" GtG 720

1. **Jesus calls us: o'er the tumult
of our life's wild, restless sea;
day by day his sweet voice soundeth
saying, "Christian, follow me!"**

2. **Jesus calls us from the worship
of the vain world's golden store,
from each idol that would keep us,
saying, "Christian, love me more."**

3. **In our joys and in our sorrows,
days of toil and hours of ease,
still he calls, in cares and pleasures,
"Christian, love me more than these."**

4. **Jesus calls us: by thy mercies,
Savior, may we hear thy call,
give our hearts to thine obedience,
serve and love thee best of all.**

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***AFFIRMATION OF FAITH**

**In life and in death we belong to God.
Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit,
we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel,
whom alone we worship and serve.**

**We trust in God the Holy Spirit,
everywhere the giver and renewer of life.
The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith,
sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor,
and binds us together with all believers
in the one body of Christ, the Church.
The same Spirit
who inspired the prophets and apostles
rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture,
engages us through the Word proclaimed,**

claims us in the waters of baptism,
feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation,
and calls women and men to all ministries of the Church.

In a broken and fearful world

the Spirit gives us courage

to pray without ceasing,

to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior,

to unmask idolatries in Church and culture,

to hear the voices of peoples long silenced,

and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.

In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit,

we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks

and to live holy and joyful lives,

even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth,

praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

With believers in every time and place,

we rejoice that nothing in life or in death

can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

(from A Brief Statement of Faith, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Book of Confessions)

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Pastor: O Lord our God...

People: ...hear our prayers today.

THE EUCHARIST

OFFERING

Invitation

Reflection

**Unison Prayer of Dedication*

Risen Savior, we come as your chosen instruments, called to serve. By your might we are empowered to do what you ask of us; with your blessing, we can rejoice in the gift of new life; to your glory we have been granted the Spirit's counsel. Responding to your love and grace, we offer you our lives and ourselves. Receive our gifts of thanksgiving and praise, and use them for your glory and the good of your people. Amen.

SACRAMENT OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

Invitation to the Lord's Table

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Leader: The Lord be with you.
People: And also with you.
Leader: Lift up your hearts.
People: We lift them to the Lord.
Leader: Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.
People: It is right to give our thanks and praise.
(The prayer continues...)

The Lord's Prayer (Traditional)

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
forever. Amen.**

Breaking of the Bread

Communion of the People

(Please hold the bread so that we might partake of it together, as a community.
Please drink the cup as you are served, in personal commitment to our Lord.)

Prayer

SENDING

*CLOSING HYMN "Will You Come and Follow Me" GtG 726

1. "Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?
Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?
Will you let my love be shown;
will you let my name be known;
will you let my life be grown in you and you in me?"

2. **“Will you leave yourself behind if I but call your name?
Will you care for cruel and kind and never be the same?
Will you risk the hostile stare
should your life attract or scare?
Will you let me answer prayer in you and you in me?”**

3. **“Will you let the blinded see if I but call your name?
Will you set the prisoners free and never be the same?
Will you kiss the leper clean,
and do such as this unseen,
and admit to what I mean in you and you in me?”**

4. **“Will you love the ‘you’ you hide if I but call your name?
Will you quell the fear inside and never be the same?
Will you use the faith you've found
to reshape the world around,
through my sight and touch and sound in you and you in me?”**

5. **Lord, your summons echoes true when you but call my name.
Let me turn and follow you and never be the same.
In your company I'll go
where your love and footsteps show.
Thus I'll move and live and grow in you and you in me.**

*The Summons, Text by John L. Bell and Graham Maule, Tune
Arr. by John L. Bell.
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***CHARGE AND BLESSING**

One: Christ is risen!

All: Christ is risen, indeed!

One: Live into the hope of Christ's resurrection!

All: We will live into the joy of Christ's call!

One: May the grace, hope, peace and love
of God our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer
be with you now and always.

And let the gathered people of God say...

All: ...Amen.

POSTLUDE

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